

# **Jazz and Social Justice (Part 1): Giving Voice to the Voiceless**

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Olivier Urbain, [olivierurbain@yahoo.com](mailto:olivierurbain@yahoo.com)  
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## **Preamble: from Hamburg to New Orleans**

Jazz was born in the 1890's in New Orleans, and since this lecture was first delivered in Hamburg, I must mention that there is a deep connection between the two cities. In his autobiography entitled *Destined to Witness*, *Growing up Black in Nazi Germany*, Hans Massaquoi explains how he was able to survive through Nazi Germany. He was born around 1925 and raised in Hamburg having a German mother and a Liberian father. His father went back to Liberia in 1930 and Hans was raised by his mother, survived the Third Reich as one of the very few black people in Hamburg, if not the only one, and went to the United States in 1950, where he had to experience another kind of racism. He fought along with Martin Luther King Jr. in the Civil Rights movement, became the managing editor of *Ebony*, the leading African-American periodical in the U.S. He is now 75 and lives a comfortable life in New Orleans. His whole life can be summarized in one sentence: from Hamburg to New Orleans.

## **Introduction: Why Jazz and Social Justice?**

Let me start with an anecdote about a famous gospel song called "Oh Happy Day." When I was about 10 years old, as I was practicing some classical scales on the piano, I heard an absolutely wonderful song coming from the living room. My parents had just bought a record and were playing it, and it sounded just fantastic, different from anything I had ever heard before. I wanted to know who the musicians were and I asked my parents to show me the record jacket.

The song was called "Oh Happy Day", and it was composed by Edwin Hawkins in 1968. I can remember clearly the great admiration I felt for the people whose photograph was on the record jacket, and I looked intently at their shining eyes and their smiles. It is only after I had started smiling back at

them that I noticed that their skin was black. The important point here is that I had heard and started loving their music before I saw their skin color, and that is why I fundamentally believe that human beings can create wonderful music, regardless of skin color, cultural background, gender or whatever, and that by extension we, the people, are all equally precious and all have the same right to a fulfilling and enjoyable life.

As a child, I asked myself the following question: "Since people can produce such beautiful art, why can't they produce a beautiful society too?" Thirty years later I am still asking myself the same question.

This is why I established the Transcend Art and Peace Network (TAP Network) last year, in order to explore the relationships between art and peace with various artists and colleagues from around the world.

Back to that song that made such an impact on me, gospel is not jazz, but it is related, and this gospel song was my introduction to the world of jazz, and it made that day, thirty years ago, indeed a very "happy day" for me.

Concerning the subtitle, "Giving Voice to the Voiceless", here is one of the best examples one can think of. It is well known that the great pianist Erroll Garner could not read music and did not like to speak in public. But the piano gave him one of the greatest voices in jazz. Once someone asked him how he could play so well when he had never learned how to read music, he answered: "Hell, man, nobody can hear you read." 1

## Jazz and the Contradictions of American Democracy

Jazz is America's music, and we cannot talk about jazz without talking about the paradoxes of U.S. democracy. Two anecdotes will illustrate this point: one has to do with the pianist Dave Brubeck, and the other is about the singer Billie Holiday.

During World War Two, during the Battle of the Bulge in the Belgian Ardennes, a group of American jazz musicians got lost deep into German territory for several hours. Fortunately they were not caught and they were able to go back safely behind the American lines. This group was called the "Wolf Pack Band" led by Dave Brubeck, a white pianist who always insisted on his musicians being both blacks and whites, on having an "integrated" band. They played for General Patton's troops from the summer of 1944 until the end of the war on May 8, 1945.

They braved incredible dangers, playing very near the front most of the time and escaping death several times, fighting for democracy and freedom against the Nazi dictatorship. They left Europe in 1946 and when they landed back home in Texas, this is what happened. They all went to the dining room to eat, but nobody wanted to serve the black musicians. They could not receive food because they were blacks. One of them turned to his white friends and said: "What I've been through and the first day I am back in the United States, I can't even eat with you guys." He said: " I wonder why I went through all this."

This episode can be said to embody one of the greatest and most perplexing paradoxes of American society. The U.S. Government sends troops all over the world in order to defend democracy and justice, but has difficulties preventing racism and discrimination at home...

It is impossible to analyze this very complex aspect of American society in this paper, but let us keep that in mind for another time, it is worth exploring. For now let us move on to the second anecdote, concerning Billie Holiday.

At some point she joined the all white band of the famous clarinetist Artie Shaw. They were playing at the Hotel Lincoln in New York, and Billie Holiday was performing with the band and staying in the hotel. This would fortunately not be the case any more today in New York, but she was ordered to use the freight elevator, in order to make sure that the white customers would not assume that blacks were staying in the hotel. She spent most of the engagement locked up in her room.

Billie Holiday had to go through many such episodes, being humiliated and discriminated against because of racism. This gives profound meaning to the fact that "Strange Fruit" became her signature song. It is a protest song written by Lewis Allen (whose real name was Abel Meeropol) in 1938 about a lynching in the American South.

Let us be aware that even today there are cases of racial murders against black people and that the infamous Ku Klux Klan and other "hate groups" are well and alive in the U.S. There are also numerous "hate groups" in other countries as well, all over the world including Neo-nazis in Germany.

Let us look at the lyrics of "Strange Fruit": they talk about a poplar tree with one large fruit hanging from it. Taking a closer look, we realize that it is not a fruit, but a human being which is hanging from the tree.

"Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees."

We are all familiar with the movie "Gone with the Wind" which shows an ideal image of the elegant aristocratic South, with the naive depiction of black slaves warmly supporting the whole thing in the background. Here is a more brutal, and unfortunately more realistic, representation:

"Pastoral scene of the gallant South,  
The bulging eyes and twisted mouth,  
The scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh."

It is said that Billie Holiday would cry every time she sung this song. It touched the heart of many Americans, blacks and whites, and it reached number 16 on the record charts in April 1939. It is a major milestone in the history of protest songs and music for civil rights, indeed in the history of "jazz and social justice".

"Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop."

## Duke Ellington: Human Dignity and True Freedom

When one belongs to a minority group which is oppressed and discriminated against, there are different ways to fight back. One option is to protest, for example by singing songs like "Strange Fruit." Another option is to become successful, very successful and to become a role model for your peers. This is exactly what Edward Kennedy Ellington did. When he turned seventy, he was awarded the "Presidential Medal of Freedom" which he received from President Nixon in person.

Edward Kennedy Ellington was born in 1899 in a comfortable middle-class home in Washington DC. In spite of the segregation and discrimination going on in the capital city too, his family was able to lead a dignified life, and they were very lucky indeed. His mother Daisy believed that he was "blessed" and

she would remain a very important source of support for her son throughout her life. For example, she taught him that "unpleasant facts and potential barriers are simply to be ignored", and one fundamental principle for success which is: "do the best you can with what you've got." Edward always remained dignified whatever happened, and he soon earned the nickname "the Duke." One anecdote shows how well Duke Ellington had absorbed these guidelines from his mother, which were also reinforced at the all-black school he attended.

In 1933 he went to Europe and England with his orchestra, and the tour was a complete triumph. However when they came back home, they started a tour of the American South, and the hotels and restaurants would refuse to serve him and his band because of their skin color. His reaction was fabulous: he arranged for the band to have their own Pullman cars, a whole train with rooms and a restaurant just for them.

The band was therefore able to play throughout the racist South while sleeping and eating comfortably, a luxury that few African American musicians could afford at the time. This is truly the principle of "Do the best you can with what you've got" in action.

In March 1939 Duke Ellington was back in Europe and his tour was again a triumph, in Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, but there is one city where he and his men could not even get off for a second, even though their train was delayed at the station for six hours. Of all the train stations of Europe, it is in the beautiful city of Hamburg, that this happened. At that time, in 1939, the Nazi regime had barred black foreigners and jazz, which they called "Nigger Jew Music." After an otherwise successful tour, Duke Ellington and his orchestra went back safely to the U.S. a few months before the actual start of the Second World War.

Many Germans tried to stand up against the Nazi regime at the cost of their lives, trying to help their compatriots to wake up from the Nazi nightmare, as for example the members of the "White Rose Movement" based in Munich. Others found in jazz music a way to resist the oppression and took risks to play and dance all night long, swinging right under the nose of the Nazi regime, secretly performing jazz songs such as Duke Ellington's "It don't Mean a Thing if it ain't got that Swing." The title of which gave its name to a whole musical movement and to the "swing era" and it was very popular in Germany in the underground movement against the Nazis.

## The Swing Kids: Jazz as Social Resistance

Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, called Jazz "the art of the subhuman." This is typical of Nazi ideology, dividing humanity between human and subhuman, or between superhuman and human. Paradoxically, it is this kind of thinking that deprives people of their very humanity. Nazism is about one small group of people who consider themselves as a "superior race" trying to dominate, control, humiliate and exterminate people of other groups. Nazism is about what has been called "ethnic cleansing" recently in former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda and too many other places.

It can be said that jazz is the exact opposite of Nazism. Jazz is about giving voice to the voiceless, it is based on individuality, which can be found in the solos, but also on participation and togetherness, since the solos are within the framework of a specific song, which the musicians have agreed to play.

In his book entitled *Swing under the Nazis: Jazz as a Metaphor for Freedom*, Mike Zwerin shows that dictatorial regimes have always banned jazz because they felt it was a threat to their obsession with absolute authority. Jazz causes the players and the listeners to long for true freedom, and this represents a threat to the existence of undemocratic regimes. It appears that Joseph Goebbels's abominable propaganda machine paradoxically encouraged the development of an underground love for jazz throughout the occupied territories, and in Germany too:

"The 'Golden Age of Jazz' coincided with the rise of the Third Reich, was limited to the territory it occupied and ended with the liberation, and that is certainly no coincidence." (Zwerin, 2000, p. 190)

A quote from Czech writer Joseph Skvorecky reads:

"Totalitarian ideologists loathe art, the product of a yearning for life, because they cannot control it. So art becomes protest like it or not. Popular mass art, like jazz, becomes mass protest. That is why the ideological guns and sometimes even the police guns of all dictatorships are aimed at the men with the horns." (Zwerin, 2000, p. 52)

During World War Two in Belgium, Radio Brussels was broadcasting music by American Jewish and Black composers, even though Goebbels had banned jazz, foxtrot and the tango and in spite of the horrendous racism that was at the

core of Nazi ideology. Most of the great jazz musicians were African Americans: Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis etc. Many of them were of Jewish background too, like the two clarinetists Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, like George Gershwin and others.

One of the greatest hits of Radio Brussels during the Nazi era was a song called "Softly as in a Morning Sunrise" by a Jewish composer called Sigmund Romberg. Many Swing Kids in Germany, or Zazous in France, were meeting secretly in order to listen to songs such as "Softly" at that time. They all ran the risk of being arrested, thrown in jail, tortured and killed by the Gestapo if they were caught, especially since it was written by a Jewish composer. If we are today in a country where we can enjoy listening to, playing or dancing to jazz without losing our freedom and our lives, we might try to think about what needs to be done in order to keep things this way, in Germany and everywhere else.

## Louis Armstrong: From Social Emancipation to Social Justice

Here are two episodes showing how, and why, Louis Armstrong contributed to social justice with his music and his life: a childhood experience that made him love people of all backgrounds, and his reaction to the Little Rock Incident.

Louis Armstrong was born in 1901 in one of the worst parts of New Orleans called "The Battle Field". He had to work from an early age, before and after school, and at age seven he found himself blowing a long tin horn in a wagon to let customers know that the coal delivery was coming. He was working for the Karnofskys, a family of Jewish immigrants, and the customers were the brothels of New Orleans. Little Louis really enjoyed that job because he could hear some good music coming from the brothels and also take a peek at the girls from time to time.

The Karnofskys always made sure he had dinner with them before he went home. Louis Armstrong would never forget their kindness, and he wore a Star of David his whole life to honor their warm and joyful memory. Mostly due to this positive multicultural experience, he would always believe in the fundamental goodness of all human beings, regardless of skin color, religion, or whatever else.

In 1957, on September 9, in Little Rock Arkansas, eight black children were trying to enter Central High School in order to attend classes, but white people

became so violent that the national guards had to come. One would think the armed men came to protect the children against the white mob, but what they did is to block the children from going to school, threatening them with their bayonets.

Before we see Louis Armstrong's reaction concerning this incident, let us note that it happened around the time when African Americans started to organize themselves around famous figures such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr, a time when the voice of the people could not be ignored any more. On December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Because of this incident Martin Luther King Jr. decided to organize the famous Montgomery bus boycott. It worked, and for a while the Montgomery buses were practically empty except for a few white passengers.

African Americans had no voice in society, and just like the Swing Kids during Nazi Germany, jazz gave them a voice. The song "Dog, Dog" was created on the streets, as African Americans were marching for civil rights. It tells us that if black and white dogs can play happily together, why should people be unable to do so? Let us imagine the pain of children unable to go to school, or of people unable to sit on a bus because of their skin color, and the creation of hundreds of songs expressing their frustration at the failure of the American dream.

One of the paradoxes of jazz is that when people listen to it, they feel better. The lyrics of the song "Dog, Dog" say: "My dog loves your dog. I'm talking about a black dog, I'm talking about a white dog. (...) Why don't we sit under the apple tree?"

Back to the Little Rock incident, Louis Armstrong was devastated when he saw on television that the national guards had been sent to stop eight black children from going to school. He was scheduled to go on a tour of the Soviet Union for the State Department. This would be the very first time that an American band would tour that part of the world during the cold war. Without hesitation, Louis Armstrong canceled the whole trip as a sign of protest coming from the heart. He felt he could not support a government that prevented little kids from going to school.

Even today, there is a lot of racism and injustice in the United States. Most of the famous musicians we have mentioned, such as Louis Armstrong,



Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, and the list goes on and on, had to undergo unbearable discrimination no matter how famous and celebrated they would become. In some cases, during performances, if they would try to go to the restroom without bodyguards during the break, they would be beaten up before they got there. The amazing thing is that jazz musicians never lost their passion for sharing their music, bringing joy to countless people, never losing their dream of a better world in spite of daily humiliations caused by discrimination and injustice.

## Conclusion: The Struggle Goes On. Shall We Overcome?

There is still a tremendous amount of injustice in our world, discrimination based on race, gender, social status, ability, culture, nationality, etc. It is we, the people who create those fault lines and it is therefore we the people who decide if we want to get rid of them or not. Are we, the people, who are capable of such creativity and talent when it comes to art, really incapable of building a harmonious society?

When one sees the development of hate groups here and there, the resurgence of Neo-nazism in Germany, in neighboring Austria and elsewhere, the revisionist attitude of some Japanese publishers of history textbooks, the lack of ethics of major decision makers, one probably has strong doubts about our common future. This gives us the blues, and we become silent, voiceless.

Then we can listen to other people's blues, to the music of thousands of musicians who were able to transform the poison of their suffering, frustration and confusion into the elixir that is jazz, and we can hear Louis Armstrong telling us: "It's OK, kid!". This gives us tremendous courage to deal with the here and now, the courage to say something and to be heard: jazz gives voice to the voiceless.

There is no guarantee that people who love peace and justice will prevail, but at least jazz can help us along the way, just like it has already helped countless people to change their lives and their societies.

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